

CHURCH UNITY

[A paper prepared by Anson R. Graves, Bishop of the Episcopal Church in western Nebraska, and read at the meeting of the Federation of Churches in Nebraska, Feb. 1st, 1910.]

We do not deem it necessary at the present time to dwell at large upon the desirability of Church Unity. The prayer of our Savior that they may all be one; the spiritual waste in the unprofitable controversies of the last three hundred years; our unpleasant rivalries in our aggressive efforts to keep this country Christian; the loss in ministerial efficiency from each denomination trying to cover the whole country; the financial waste in sustaining half a dozen parishes in our smaller towns; the divided front we present against skepticism, infidelity, the world, the flesh and the devil; the confusion of the poor heathen at our divisions in all our foreign missionary work; all these hindrances to the coming of Christ's kingdom on earth are now becoming known and realized by our people as never before. That being the case it is high time that we turned our attention most earnestly and lovingly to the ways and means by which a practical working unity of the Christian churches can be brought about.

I think we have made a mistake in the past by dwelling too much on what we imagine each branch of the church, or denomination, may have to surrender in order to attain church unity. We have dwelt too little upon the important things in which we are in substantial agreement and not at all upon those things in which each denomination might possibly gain something by unity. In our present consideration therefore let us take this latter course and see if the way cannot be smoothed somewhat toward Christian unity.

THE BIBLE.

First in regard to the Holy Scriptures. Notwithstanding what certain critics think they have discovered in some minor and non-essential features of the Bible, or in the traditions in regard to its different books, we are all substantially agreed that it contains the word of God, that its teachings and precepts are inspired by more than human wisdom, and that it is our great authority in regard to religious doctrine and practice. We are not likely to find any serious obstacle or diffi-

culty in the way we regard the Holy Scriptures.

DOCTRINE.

In regard to essential doctrines we shall find ourselves in closer agreement than many people suppose. As far as I know all Christians in this country who hold the doctrine of the Trinity accept in their formularies or in their preaching the doctrine contained in the two ancient creeds of the early undivided Church known as the Apostles and Nicene creeds. In fact one or other of them is already contained in the leading confessions of faith. I think that the other bodies which have no elaborate confession of faith expect their candidates for baptism to accept the fundamentals contained in those creeds. It is true that some churches impose more elaborate confessions, as important if not essential, but that ought not to present any insuperable difficulty. Some arrangement can be made whereby those who wish to bind themselves farther than the Apostles' creed can be free to do so without compelling others, who think that creed a sufficient statement of Christian doctrine, to remain outside the Church. Certainly the vast majority of Christians in all ages have been received into the Church on this simple confession. No doubt many of the great principles contained in the Augsburg Confession, the Thirty-nine Articles, the Westminster Confession and other like formulas will continue to be preached by philosophical men in any church broad enough to hold the ablest thinkers. But why impose them on millions of plain people who cannot understand even the terms in which they are expressed! I am sure when large minded and large hearted men get together for considering such matters they will place no intellectual barriers in the way of plain men, women and children who are anxious to become Christ's followers. And those churches which have no formulas of faith except the whole Bible cannot seriously object to the Apostles' creed which is the briefest possible summary of Bible truth and generally expressed in the words of Scripture. Possibly a briefer summary might be used in certain cases such as was made by the Ethiopian eunuch when he was baptized, viz., "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." On the fundamentals of the Christian faith we are now in substantial agreement, all of us preaching one God and Father of all, one Christ and Savior of all, and one Holy Ghost, the Sanctifier of all.

THE SACRAMENTS.

In regard to the two sacraments ordained by Christ, baptism and the Lord's supper, there are a hundred different views and theories as to their nature, efficacy and administration. They are mysteries which men always have been, and

always will be, trying to understand and explain. I do not suppose, however, any of us think it essential to salvation that a recipient of these sacraments must hold any one special theory. What do such words as regeneration, transubstantiation, consubstantiation, real presence, etc., signify to one half the people who come in all humility to receive what the Lord has to give them in those sacraments! And who doubts that those who do come in true penitence, faith and charity to these sacraments receive the benefits, whatever the theory they may hold in regard to the mysterious process by which they receive them? I do not see how any Christian minister can object to administer those sacraments with the use of the words and materials in which Christ directed and administered them himself. That is all that should be required and I think in most cases is all that is required.

In regard to the particular form or manner in which the sacraments are to be administered, the fittest will surely survive when we come together and make an unprejudiced use of different methods.

FREEDOM OF WORSHIP.

In regard to forms, or outlines, for our ordinary services and worship there must be the greatest freedom and where possible considerable variety. This does not mean that the ministers only should be free to select or disregard forms, but the tastes and wishes of the congregation should be considered. There are many people who are not only unfamiliar with liturgical forms of worship but are unsuited by their natures, or by lack of opportunity, to even learn a hearty use of such services. On the other hand there are those who from childhood have learned the use of such forms and to whom the "go as you please" methods do not seem like worship at all. All these differences must be considered and the clergy must learn to conduct any kind of service best suited to the people and the conditions. To this end where one large church is to supply the needs of a whole town, or community, there might be two or more ministers and several kinds of services at different hours on Sundays. In this way if there is any one kind of service best fitted for all, that kind will eventually survive. The tendency seems to be that the more cultured people prefer liturgical services, but those who have had fewer advantages prefer extempore services. However that may be, there must be freedom and elasticity in our methods of worship. Prayer meetings, love feasts, probation classes, Christian Endeavor and like societies, brotherhoods, various guilds and all other methods and organizations which have been found helpful by the different churches in the last three hundred years should be freely

tried, as experiments if nothing more. Wherever they are found helpful they should be retained and where they are not then something else should be tried.

CHURCH GOVERNMENT.

On all the matters thus far considered I do not think we shall find any great obstacle to unity. It is when we approach the subjects of what constitutes a valid or authorized ministry, of what is the best form of church government and the proper combination and use of church property that we shall need the greatest patience, the largest allowances, the most generous and loving spirit. We are each so wedded to our own methods and opinions by long use that it is difficult to stand back, look impartially at all and choose that which is the most effective. It does not seem impossible to me that there might be some sort of combination which would preserve the best features of each church.

There seem to be three general methods of church government, episcopal, presbyterian and congregational. Experience has shown that there are good features in each which might to a considerable extent be preserved. It is quite likely that each of us has carried our theory on this subject too far, or has insisted on it too strenuously. Now let us look calmly at the situation as we see it in this country. The oldest churches in this country are the Episcopal, the Presbyterian or Dutch Reformed and the Congregational, and those three in general represent the three kinds of church government. Now has any one of these kinds of church government been pre-eminently successful and efficient in gathering in the great mass of the American people? I think we must acknowledge that the Methodists have outstripped us all. Now wherein lies the cause of this? Is it because their ministers have greater natural ability or more thorough education or greater piety than the rest of us? I doubt if any of us is willing to admit that, or that the Methodists would claim it. Wherein then does the strength of this Samson lie? If we study the matter calmly I think we shall find it in their church organization and government. The great authority, they have given to their bishops and the close supervision of all their parishes and missions by their presiding elders, creating as they do an army-like solidarity to their work, account for their enthusiasm and mammoth-like growth. It is not pleasant for us older churches who think we are founded on a rock to admit all this, but facts are facts and better not be ignored. I think the Church of the future, in this country at least, should be modeled in a general way after the Methodist system. There are indications now in

the other bodies pointing that way. The Episcopal church somewhat resembles it now, but its immense dioceses prevent the close supervision needed for the work and it is trying to remedy the defect by appointing suffragan bishops, archdeacons and department secretaries of missions. The Presbyterian churches and the several kinds of Congregational churches are supplementing their systems by using moderators, state superintendents of missions, educational secretaries and such officers. I believe the work done by all these supernumary or supplementary officials is better and more systematically done by the bishops and presiding elders of the Methodist church. Another advantage the Methodists have over the rest of us by their close supervision is that they can use in their ministry men who are more closely in touch and sympathy with the common people, even if such ministers are not so highly educated. We are all needing more ministers yet we make our standards and requirements so high that we bar out many an earnest and effective man.

Now can this change in church government be made and still preserve to some extent those features in our other churches which have been found valuable, or by long use have become precious? Can the Congregational idea be in part preserved so that the people can have a considerable voice in the choice of their pastors and in the management of local affairs? The Methodists have already modified their system in practice, if not in theory, so that their congregations have a great deal to say. In my opinion it is better that congregations should have some voice in these matters than that this whole business should be left in the hands of a vestry, committee, or board of trustees. Possibly for the sake of unity the Methodist, the Episcopal and some other churches would consent to such a modification of their systems as would permit the congregations, especially self-supporting congregations, to have a more active and interested part in the management of local affairs. A little might be lost in the way of concentrated energy, but much would be gained in the way of general interest in the church's affairs.

Can the best features of the Presbyterian and Lutheran churches be preserved? I think in most of the churches now the presbyters, or ministers, have a leading influence and power in local and general matters and that might be guaranteed to them in the constitution without a serious departure from the Congregational and Episcopal idea. In most of our churches now I believe the elders, or presbyters, have a definite part assigned them in the ordination of ministers, the election of bishops, or presiding officers, and in

church government. It would seem that this matter might be arranged without serious difficulty.

Can the Episcopal idea, or the so-called historic episcopate, which is precious to all the ancient churches and to millions of Christians, be adequately preserved without humiliation to those who do not now have it? This is perhaps the most difficult and delicate matter to handle in the whole scheme of church unity. We must approach it in a broad-minded, considerate and loving spirit. If we adopt in general outline the Methodist organization, where overseers are already provided for, the practical, working features might possibly be worked out as follows: Let those who correspond to the Methodist bishops become archbishops, patriarchs, or metropolitans with constitutional limitations so as not to lord it over God's heritage, but to preside at councils and be the channels of communication with other great Christian bodies. They would not be very different from the present moderators or presiding officers of our church councils, or assemblies. In this way each one of the United States, or each district contiguous to a great commercial center, might become a province suitable for managing missions and other matters local to that district. Those who correspond to presiding elders would become bishops, like the *choriepiscopei* of the early church, with authority to ordain and confirm with such other duties as now belong to presiding elders.

Now how shall we work into this general system the historic episcopate without seeming to humiliate those ministers whose work has been blessed of God, but who have not received their ordination from the ancient line of bishops? I see but one way. We must provide for a transition period. First there should be no re-ordination of present ministers which might humiliate them, except at their own request. Nor must there be any suspicions or reflections cast on the validity of the blessed work which they have done in the past. We cannot prevent what narrow minded people may say in regard to this, but we can ignore it. In all future ordination of ministers and consecration of bishops the presbyters or elders of the various churches should unite with the historic episcopate in the laying on of hands. Then whatever of blessing or authority there is in the ministry of any of the churches will be preserved. In this method all ought to be satisfied. It would cast no more shadow over the past of one church than of another and there is no humiliation in it. I see no other way in this matter of bringing about a unity and at the same time keep open the possibility of union in some distant future with the ancient churches of the eastern hemisphere.

THE NAME.

The name of the great, united Church of the future might properly be The United Church of the United States, or simply The Church in the United States, or The American Church. These are mere suggestions which may, or may not, be acceptable to the majority.

CHURCH PROPERTY.

In regard to the best way of holding church property, I would merely suggest that in the long experience of the Episcopal Church we have found that generally it is safer and better to have the property held in fee by central boards of trustees than by local vestries or trustees. This will prevent the mortgaging or unwise sale of local property in times of seeming emergency. Much valuable church property has been lost to the churches in that way. Investigation of local conditions by a central board and sometimes temporary aid from outside will often tide over an emergency and save a valuable property.

In regard to which church property, in towns where there are now several church buildings, shall be reserved for the use of the United Church and what disposition shall be made of the others, all this must be left to duly appointed commissioners. These commissioners should consist of able ministers, Christian lawyers and other good judges of real estate. Some of the properties not needed for the great congregation might be used for mission chapels, Sunday schools, parish houses for social gatherings, reading rooms and such other purposes as are now in a few places provided by the Young Men's Christian Association.

All the above matters cannot be arranged in a day nor in a decade of years. In these matters patience and forbearance must have their perfect work. Still all ought to be well accomplished long before the twentieth century passes away.

CONCLUSION.

Under this plan of unity what serious thing of value has to be given up by any of the churches? The Methodist may possibly surrender the name under which his church has made glorious conquests, but very little if anything else. The Baptist of many kinds may surrender his compulsory immersion and close communion, but he retains all the immersion he desires for himself and those like him. The Congregationalist may compromise the idea that practically all power and authority are vested in the laity of the separate congregations, but he retains for the laity a fair share, and through the purse a largely controlling share, of the power and influ-

ence. The Presbyterian and Lutheran may compromise the idea that all spiritual authority is vested in the presbyters, but he retains a full and rightful share for the priesthood. The Episcopalian may compromise the idea that God can be acceptably worshiped only by the forms of the prayer book, but he retains his highly prized historic episcopate. The Sabbatarian may surrender his present privilege of working on Sunday, but a strong, united church can enable the conscientious Sabbatarian to keep sacred both the Sabbath and the Lord's Day. There is hardly anything in theory and practice peculiar to any of the separate churches which one may not continue to hold as a private opinion, or may practice, so long as he does not impose it on others, and still belong to the great united Church.

The gain that will come to us all by union cannot be named nor estimated. It will be so great that coming generations will consider it the most amazing fact of all history that we could remain so long apart, wounding and severing the Body of Christ.

I am well aware that some will say, and truly, that it is easy to make a general outline of how a thing may be done, but the chief difficulty will come in arranging the details. Granted; yet if the general outline covers all matters of principle and conscience, the details can be managed by reasonable men. I believe it is the immensity of the undertaking rather than any particular difficulties that cause men to shrink from making a beginning and be willing to throw the responsibility on the next generation. But that is not a brave or Christlike spirit. We may have to make the beginning with two or three of the churches and feel our way carefully still bearing in mind the valuable features of the other churches which are to unite later.

I believe we can at least make a beginning according to the plan outlined above, changing and adapting it to the unforeseen conditions and difficulties as they appear. I am sure that God will bless in some way every honest effort in the direction of church unity and will eventually answer the prayer of Christ, and the prayer of millions of loving hearts today, "That they all may be one."

The ministers of this generation will naturally and properly continue to minister for the most part to people of their present denomination so there need be no sudden and unpleasant change in methods of work and worship. The younger generation of ministers and people will grow gradually into the variety and elasticity of methods and worship which will be characteristic of the church of the future.